

Women and Patriarchy: A Reading of Zaynab Alkali's The Stillborn

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Abstract

“Men are presented as the first in everything even when they are not, and the best also when they are not. They are the king and they are the head. They lead in every matter whether they can take decisions that would be of importance to the society or not. They are made more important than women [1:280].” Such a quotation gives us a hint at who are the true decision makers in a patriarchal society. As a result, the research looks at the position of women in a patriarchal society and de facto the roles played by both male and female characters responsible for the subordination of women. Also, the research investigates the reasons that have conditioned Zaynab Alkali and de facto her female characters to protest the place and the role given to them by the patriarchal society and bring out its aesthetics in contributing to the liberation of the female characters in the novel. While the textual analysis is limited to *The Stillborn*, the research helps to pay a critical attention not only to the marginalization of women, but also to the awareness of power of female gender as an equal force in the socio economic and political development of the continent. Finally, the researcher employs the theory of African feminism to enable the reader to uncover some measures of protest by women in their attempt to create a more suitable society.

Keywords: Alkali; Female upheaval; Patriarchy.

1. Introduction

It is generally believed that one of the best ways to learn about a given culture, such as to examine the position of women in a patriarchal society, is to go and live with the people from that cultural background and spend a given period of time with them. But, this would seemingly result in an understanding at a sociological and, perhaps, anthropological level. However, a literary text can provide an excellent background for socio cultural studies.

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This is, not only, because a literary work is, almost, a reflection of the writer's inherent society or culture but, also, because literature is "one of the channels through which negative attitudes and stereotypes of women are perpetuated or even created [2:75]." Thus, the modern African literature, in general, and literature by women, in particular, convey so many patriarchal prejudices against women. That is the reading of Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*, for instance, can reveal the social and cultural location of women in the patriarchal Hausa society of Nigeria. But, what is patriarchy to begin with?

According to [3], patriarchy is a "social system in which the oldest man rules his family and passes power and possessions onto his sons." Furthermore, the same dictionary states that it is a "system in which men have all the power." For [4: 216-17], patriarchy is the "manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance in society in general." [5:20], on her side, sees patriarchy as a "system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women."

Thus, in our modern societies where the International Women's year is celebrated, the gender issue needs a close examination. In the process of the examination, [6:249] states that: "One of the ways correcting one's faulty image of the African woman would be through the reading of creative literature. But even there one is in danger of acquiring biased information...what one should really look for is the African woman seen from the 'inside', in other words rendered by women." Such view proceeds from the premise that a female writer's perception of issues is likely to differ from a male writer's. The author in [7] argues that the advent of female literature promises woman's view of life or woman's experience.

However, what is quite unquestionable is that as they write in a largely patriarchal environment where the woman is not positively recognized, the African women writers have a number of perspectives to consider in the course of creating a literature that pays attention to the socio-cultural position of women. As a result, our choice of the novel, *The Stillborn*, and its setting, Northern Nigeria, is relevant because in the novel, men place rigid norms and rules on women by reducing them to a minor status. Also, [8:35] states that the African women writers are the "unheard voices rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies." Not only that as we are, also, left to wonder whether the African male writers have been able to communicate to us with realism how women live within a patriarchal society. That is, certainly, why, we attempt to approach the issue through the theme of Women and Patriarchy: A Reading of Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*.

2. African Feminism

To begin with, it is important to point out that African feminism in literature has been received with controversial and often mixed feelings. But, since one of the expected outcomes of this research is to show that cultural differences are reflected in the discussions of feminism, we can recall [9:25] who says that African Feminism "challenges patriarchal tradition and enhances the notion of family. It seeks egalitarian partnership between male and female." For [10], Filomina Steady, after examining the living experience of African women in Africa and the diaspora, defines an African feminism in her introduction to *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* as follows: "African brand of feminism includes female autonomy and cooperation...the centrality of

children, multiple mothering and kinship...” Furthermore, [10: 8-9] summaries a genuine African feminism as follows:

Firstly, it recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women’s subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples. Secondly, An African feminist consciousness recognizes that certain inequities and limitations existed/exist in tradition societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced others. As such, it acknowledges its affinities with international feminism, but delineates a specific African feminism with certain specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women’s lives in African societies...Fourthly, African feminism examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment and does not simply import Western women’s agendas. Thus, it respects African woman’s status as mother but questions obligatory motherhood and the traditional favoring of sons. It sees utility in the positive aspects of the extended family and polygamy with respect to child care and the sharing of household responsibility, traditions which are compatible with modern women’s lives and the problems of child care...

Also, References [11:145] calls to our attention that “No writer, female or male, is a feminist just by writing about women...Unless a particular writer commits his or her energies actively to exposing the sexist tragedy of women’s history; protesting the on-going degradation of women; celebrating their physical and intellectual capabilities...” In the light of the author [11], African feminism, in literature, can be defined as a concept in which women tend to rise and fight the traditional knowledge of men about women so as to bring about equal rights and explain to the society through their forms of writings their own positive qualities that will be needed in developing the entire society.

What is more, African feminism is steps different from the Western feminism. While Western feminism negates men, African feminism accommodates men. It is about the struggle of women to be free, the belief that women, too, are human beings and should be treated the same way men are treated. It is neither against marriage nor is it against childbearing. That is, certainly, why [12:349] defines it as a “feminism from the African woman’s perspective.” Accordingly, there is no doubt, Zaynab Alkali’s aim is to deconstruct and, at the same time, to correct the evils of patriarchy in her society. This aim is known to [13:119] when she states that Alkali’s preoccupation is “the plight of young girls in a society where their only viable option for long-term emotional survival is to strive and achieve a meaningful education.”

Although Alkali portrays female characters more positively compared to the male characters, yet, she shows that the two need each other. Reference [14:160] points out that one of the major achievements of Zaynab Alkali is to make “the man see his shortcomings, as in a mirror of life, and forcing a change of attitude that benefits both man and woman.” What is more, [15: 96] quotes Alkali in her own words: “A total rejection of the marriage institution, an establishment of ‘alternative living arrangements, a world of ‘women without men’, are no answers to our social problems. If anything, such a stance is a compounding of our already deteriorating social conditions. We need each other, men women and children” For Alkali, the family system is one of the most

important units in human society; hence the suitability of using African feminist theory in examining Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*.

3. Hausa society and the position of women

Every literature is a literature of a given community at a particular time or period. [16:20] views that: "In every literary work the writer always attempts to mirror the society by making his work exposit or reflect the contemporary realities of his society." For [11:108], "the function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demands that the writer, as a public voice, assumes a responsibility to reflect public concerns in his [or her] writings..." There is no doubt, the developments that take place within a society constitute the raw materials for the women writer's works. Also, since the setting of *The stillborn* is Northern Nigeria, largely dominated by the Hausas, it is then good to point out the position of women in the society as reflected through the novel.

To begin with, the Hausa people are found in all part of Nigeria, but they are most numerous in the North. In the Northern side of Nigeria, we find more Muslims than Christians. That is to say, women are generally brought up according to the principles of Islam. But before the advent of Christianity and Islam, there was another religion deeply rooted in the people, namely animism. However, of these three religions, Islam has the greatest influence on women's life. Such clarity about the scriptures is brought into focus (though they are not our concern in this paper) because in a patriarchal society, most often, references are made to the scriptures to support male supremacy. Thus, since Northern Nigeria is a patriarchal or a patrimonial society, property and political power are received by right of birth along the male line.

In reality, in a typical Hausa society, there is no mixing up of males and females in the day to day activities. A woman's existence is limited to giving pleasure to her husband, bearing children, carrying the household tasks. In addition, what has worsened the position of women is the perception of marriage, imposed silence, abuse of women in polygamy, oppression of barren women, the male child preference and a variety of other forms of discrimination intrinsic to the society.

In fact, most often, tradition expects women to remain in marriage both for better and for worse. The Hausa people believe that an unmarried woman is unfulfilled. Reference [14:42], upon analyzing the traditional orientation of *The Stillborn*, states that: "No woman within the culture is seen as fulfilled unless she is hanging on the arm of some man, any man." That is probably why, in a traditional Hausa society, when a girl refuses to marry, she is subjected to the criticism of the society, for marriage is the only means of social integration. At least, this is what we learn through Sule's comment on Awa: "Look at you, eighteen years old, still at home, single [17:3-4]." Accordingly, [18:15] states that marriage is a highly social expectation so that "It looms upon the horizon of any maid and youth as an indispensable obligation to be fulfilled with as little delay as possible after reaching the age of puberty."

Moreover, married women are taught that a good wife does not raise her voice over her husband. One can see this culture of silence operating in the life of Li's mother. She represents the generation of women whose voices

have been suppressed because she believes in silence as a golden rule. That is certainly why, she lives an almost nonexistent life in her own home as a typical traditional wife without any education.

Also, in the Hausa society of *The Stillborn*, it was common to find many women for one man. This is explicit in *The Stillborn* whereby Li's grandfather, an animist, marries four women. Today, the Islamic religious belief coincides very often with this traditional cultural practice which has kept women in a slave role model. For instance, Garba's exposé of his perception of polygamy, in *The Stillborn*, is quite degrading for women as he believes that "one can acquire many wives without slaving for them [17:45]." Garba, further, recalls a testimony of a friend "who keeps four women in four different areas of the city. None of them knows the others exist and they all slave for him [17:45]."

In fact, in Islam, the Holy Qur'an allows any Muslim to marry up to four wives if he wishes: "Mary women of your choice, two, three or four but if ye fear that one shall not be able to deal justly(with them) then only one [19:100]." But, the quotation clearly implies that a husband must give his wives equal consideration in the house (at least materially). But practically speaking, it is very hard not to say impossible to love four wives without being partial. The example of Faku, in *The Stillborn*, is, quite, illustrative. That is, after her marriage with Garba, Faku (the robust friend of Li) soon becomes a thin woman with a haggard face, as a result of lack of proper care from her polygamous husband. However, as Faku was not, educationally or vocationally, equipped to handle with life without a husband, she "drifted without a proper sense of direction [17:102]."

In addition, in a typical Hausa society, the value of a married woman lies in her productivity. In other words, it is as a mother that a Hausa woman plays her most important role in the family. This is because in the social context, a woman is expected to bear children. So no matter her wealth or her beauty, an unproductive woman is considered useless in her society. It is over the question of children that most women are often vexed or humiliated; even though they strongly believe that children will come when God wills them.

The issue of women reduced to nothing just because they are barren is echoed by Hajiya's husband when he says: "The building in the heart of the city, behind the Emir's palace is yours. Collect the rents. I no longer have the strength to go out and work, and when I die, they will split my wealth over my corpse, like vulture over a carcass. They will not give you a brick because you have no child [17:73]."

In the above quotation, Hajiya is a living example of Hausa women who are facing the problem of barrenness. In such a condition, women hardly contribute to community matters since they devote all their energies in seeking family stability. For instance, Hajiya did all her best to obtain a child that has never come:

I married at the age of thirteen and for forty years I prayed... for a child. I went to Mecca nine times. I gave all my wealth to mallams, herbalists and spiritual healers for a child that never comes. My husband lost no time in marrying other wives who promptly gave him eleven sons and four daughters. I was the eldest wife and the only barren one... I was pushed to the background because I had no child [17:72]

Although Alkali does not openly state that in the Hausa society the importance of a woman depends on the number of her male children, she states in *The Stillborn* that there are privileges bestowed on male children.

This view is what Alkali explicitly expressed about Li's father when she says that "he could beat Awa easily if she erred, no matter how old she was, but not Sule, his first born male child...[17:23]." Note that Awa was the first born of the family and a primary school teacher; while Sule, the male child, is a primary school pupil.

What is more, [20:14] upon examining *Gender Concepts and Issues in Nigeria*, states that in case of extreme son preference "... pregnant women may undergo scanning to determine the sex of the child. Where it is discovered that the child in the womb is a female child, the pregnancy is aborted." Accordingly, [21:50] observes that society "readily accepts certain behaviors from men and considers them normal but when women exhibit similar behavior, they are classified as deviant." Yet, as [22:168] points it out: "A society which sets double morale standards for its adult population based on sex and gender is setting up the society for perpetual condoning of discrimination against the weak." And what is more, "... no matter how clever the wanted male child is, he would not be where he is without the mother, the unwanted girl child [23:105]." It is, certainly, against this gloomy background of women's situation, in a patriarchal Hausa society of Nigeria, that Alkali, as a writer, develops strategies to free women from the yoke.

4. Alkali's strategies to free women from the patriarchal yokes

The section aims at discussing the impact of the patriarchal codes of conduct on women and bring out, accordingly, the strategies employed by Alkali to free women from the yoke. This is because a woman has no say in everything that needs mutual understanding. In other words, it is difficult for a woman to be a decision maker in almost all the sensitive areas of activities. A woman has to be dependent on men for support. Educational achievements and financial standing are reserved for men while the place of women is the kitchen. Finally, such ideas, embedded in men's mind, have created a very oppressive state of affairs for African women today. Ama Atta Aidoo, the Ghanaian woman writer, seemingly conveys Alkali's preoccupations when she says: "...it is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without also believing that African women must have the best that environment can offer [22:304-305]." That is certainly why Alkali, among many other women writers, appreciates the need to free the African women from the yoke by giving them voice and by molding her own method of revolt, a revolt which will reflect her own independence or originality. In fact, female writers, in general, and Alkali, in particular, take time to explore the circumstances, the pressures and the deprivations that their characters suffer, within patriarchy, in order to soften the societal conscience so that the societal scales of justice could shift toward the correct balance. It, thus, becomes worthwhile at this very point to show the coping strategies of Zaynab Alkali's female characters to maintain some measures of autonomy in their roles as wives, mothers or divorcees. This is because as [24:16] observes: "...majority of women assume 'silence is golden' because they lack the confidence or education to deal with male dominance." Thus, to fight the voicelessness, Alkali uses the aesthetics of education which is, according to her, one of the major agents of women's liberation and emancipation. To begin with, Li's society is a very restrictive society, especially for women. It is difficult for a woman to be a decision maker in almost all the sensitive areas of activities. A woman should be obedient first to her parents, then to her husband and her people as a community. Li, herself, complains that "the atmosphere in her father's compound [is] suffocating [17:3]." Li, later, rationalizes that the atmosphere is "worse than a prison [17:3]." [15:100] commenting on the significance of words such as "suffocating, trapped, restrictions, and prison", states that they "create images of entrapment and asphyxia

which aptly describe Li's claustrophobic feelings about her home and stifling effects of restrictive traditional norms on women." For instance, the patriarchal pressures are expressed through Awa, a character in *The Stillborn* and a senior sister to Li, the protagonist. Awa, truly, represents the generation of submissive women. She suffers a lot in the hands of men, being maltraited by the Headmaster whom she eventually marries. She believes that: "every woman needs a man...at least to mend the fence [17:88]." Her conservative attitude to traditional norms makes her a victim of the patriarchal society as Sule, her brother, says in a conversation: "Look at you, eighteen years old, still at home, single. Not allowed to go out at all except to the market, the riverside, the prayer house...Even then you are always watched [17:3-4]." As a result, Alkali shows that such a conservatism is not without a negative effect on the side of women because they will be reduced to silence and be ill-treated such that the African researcher [22] is of the view that equal rights to all citizens is made a mockery in Nigeria. That is certainly why, Alkali opens her novel with a sudden confrontation of Li with the world of the adults which may be a significant and direct comment on the process of maturation. She bestows Li with modern education and recognizing that her salvation lies in herself, Li seeks to escape from her oppressive family. She wishes to do things "without having someone breathing down [her] neck demanding to know where [she has] been to [17:3]." By depicting Li as a social rebel, Alkali wants to say that enough is enough and that women should be given due consideration as they are also humans with feelings and emotions. Moreover, it is common for a Hausa boy to woo a girl with gifts. This practice encourages competition among suitors. Sometimes, a young girl is given to the man with most gifts, thus subverting love as a criterion for marriage because most often the authority resides with the elders. [25:12] points out that girl-father relationship, at large, is based on the principle that the girl is "supposed to do what her parents, especially her father, tells her. She marries when the parents think she is old enough to marry and often with the man they have chosen/or approved for her." However, Alkali's creates Li, as an independent woman and able to subvert the patriarchal norms. For instance, she marries Habu Adams by virtue of love rather than money which seemingly has blinded all of Li's community to the extent that the wealthy Alhaji Bature is her parents' and community's preferred suitor. Alkali describes Alhaji Bature as "a real man with the strength of a lion and the gentleness of a cat. He was considerate and generous like the gods, a man who was the dream of the village maidens. Could she [Li] not consent to marry him and live like daughter of a chief? [17:64]." In this way, Alkali does not only reveal the extent to which young girls are used as objects to meet their parents' selfish interests; but also and mainly by privileging the girl's choice, she has shown to the face of the world that a conventional marriage is by no means a guarantee for the success of a marriage. A successful marriage should be based on love and mutual understanding. Also, in Li's family as in many other families, daughters fetch water, do the dishes, wash clothes, help mothers to cook. That is, young girls are condemned to the life of domestication and denigration to the extent that, often, when women live their husbands, they cannot handle with the situation and succumb into prostitution. For instance, in *The Stillborn*, when Faku, Li's childhood friend, summons up her courage and leaves her husband, Garba, she "drifted without a proper sense of direction [17:102]", but eventually affirms herself through prostitution. But, unlike other women who go into prostitution for commercial reasons, Faku engages herself in 'the sex trade' as a survival strategy to ease her life of misery [17]. However, Alkali shows that the burden shouldered by women has its source in traditional practices, beliefs and prejudices which arise from ignorance. That is certainly why, Faku, later, manages to transcend her situation thanks to education by acquiring the necessary skills to get a job as a social welfare worker and becomes as "someone who had, at last, found a meaning in life [17:102]." Alkali

points out that education is key to women's liberation. Thanks to modern education, Li, the protagonist, is even able to live her husband and yet suffer no consequences of handling her own life and even that of the family. An illustrative example can be found through the narrator's comment about Li, when her mother and sister, Awa, pressed her to return to her husband despite the latter's rejection: Li wouldn't listen to any of these suggestions. All these years she had waited for a man who cared nothing about her...was she to spend the rest of her life waiting for a man like a dog waiting for the bone from its master's plate? Who says a husband makes for a guardian or a father? Certainly not the Hausas, who says, 'a woman who takes a husband for a father will die an orphan.' She had then vowed to go back to the world and make an independent life for herself...Now five years later, she was ready to read for her advanced Teacher's Certificate...Only then would she assume the role of the 'man of the house' in her father's compound [17:85]. Alkali's aesthetic message tends to say that the syndrome of dependency has no place in educated women and that even if fate turns out to be the case that these two characters find themselves in, education can be a source of contentment. They can sustain their lives and that of their children without the help and support of their husbands providing that the woman is self-assertive. That is why, Alkali juxtaposes Awa, who firmly believes that "every woman needs a man...at least to mend the fence [17:88]", with Li, who firmly acknowledges and tells her husband that: "there is more to being a father [or a man] than lying between a woman's thighs [17:91]." Awa, herself, says to Li, upon Kaka's burial: "The mourners are outside and waiting for you. You are the man of the house now [17:101]." Li, for instance, does not change her sex to become 'the man of the house' but she assumes the function by performing the responsibilities that any responsible head of a household is likely to perform. Also, within patriarchal societies, it is common to hear men and ironically women themselves saying: "How can you listen to this and take it as serious? It is all women's talk!" It follows that not only gossips are considered to be affairs of women, alone, but also that women's arguments are not worthy in a social gathering, no matter how desirable a woman's wisdom may be. However, since masculinity is not a biological category as much as a social construct subject to change, revision and multiple representations, Alkali, in *The Stillborn*, involves men within a gossip to mainly show that gossip is not an affair of women, alone. For instance, in *The Stillborn*, Mariama, Manu, Hauwa and Audu are all involved in a gossip as they find out about other people's activities and background to the extent that everything that happens in the village and the city are in their hands: "In the village whatever remains secret has not yet happened [17:50]." Moreover, the general belief is that the role of women starts and ends with running of the home and nothing more. Activities such as cooking, cleaning, washing the dishes, fetching wood and water are attributed to women. Consequently, a person who is conscious of his gender identity would always insist that cooking, for instance, should be done by a woman. However, in *The Stillborn*, Alkali uses the episode of the son of Audu who turns to be a cook in the city: "Like a woman, he [Audu's son] cooks for the big men in the city [17:49]" to remind both men and women that women, too, are individuals with feelings and emotions and that women can do men's work and vice versa. This is a strategy employed by Alkali to bring both men and women to equal consideration and to free women from partial judgment. This is because cooking, for instance is a gender role and not a sex role since both men and women can carry out the function. In sum, Alkali is more than a bench warming spectator as what she, aesthetically, conveys in *The Stillborn* is to prompt African Women to be conscious of the roles they play in the society and redress distorted images. According to [15:120], Alkali's message is that a "woman must, like Li, map out survival strategies and succeed despite the crippling and stunting circumstances that define her existence in a patriarchal culture." However, despite all the

efforts by women and men of good will to free women from the patriarchal yoke, Alkali shows that the total freedom of women is a long way to go due to strong patriarchal codes that shape the minds of both men and women as we, tentatively, reflect in the next section.

5. Alkali's strategies to point out the heavy hands of patriarchy

This section identifies some still heavy hands of patriarchy on women. That is, despite the efforts devoted so far in the eradication of patriarchy by both men and women, a lot remains to be done. Such views on the heavy hands of traditions are implicitly but aesthetically expressed by Alkali in *The Stillborn*. As a result, what follows is not an attempt to criticize Zaynab Alkali as a writer; rather it appreciates her feminist aesthetics which enables her to act as a teacher and inform the readers of *The Stillborn* about what is going on in her patriarchal Hausa society of Nigeria. To begin with and as far as Alkali is concerned, and of course having in mind that Li's effort to have a career, even as a teacher, is revolutionary in the context of her society's culture, one is left to wonder why she could not pursue courses in medicine, aviation, engineering, architecture or any of such disciplines which seem to be strictly the traditional reserve of men? Thus, by choosing the teaching profession, Li helps bring to life what the patriarchal colonialists of Europe started in Nigeria and Africa as a whole; that is to make one believe that a professional woman is only complete if her work offers her the opportunities to run the family. Also, because of the patriarchal norms highly rooted in her society and its influence on Li, her teaching profession is just limited to the obtention of a job rather than a committed pursuit of a career whereby she can teach women on several issues affecting their life. Certainly, Alkali seeks to inform the readers that patriarchy is deeply rooted and holding it back requires a great deal of courage and perseverance. In fact, it is in the character portrayal of Li that one can witness the influence of such patriarchal codes of conduct. Despite her age of flower, her success as a teacher, owner of a "huge modern and enviable building [17:101]" and the mother of a seven years old daughter, she feels 'empty' and unfulfilled as revealed through the novelist comment on her: "for ten years she had struggled towards certain goals. Now, having accomplished these goals, she wished there was something else to struggle for. For that was the only way life could be meaningful [17:102]." This proves that Li has to struggle again and again to achieve greater things in accordance with patriarchal expectations. Moreover, though Li is educated in a society full of restrictions whereby "the don't heavily outnumbered the do's [17:3]" and despite Li's determination to go her own way and fulfill her dreams such as to marry the man of her choice in opposition to her community's preferred suitor; yet Li's marriage, which is based on love and mutual understanding, is a failure. Does Alkali mean that conventional marriages are the everlasting marriages? Certainly the answer is an absolute no. Alkali simply wants to inform the readers of *The Stillborn* that the freedom of women is a long way to go. This is because patriarchy is so strong that even some women perpetuate the patriarchal codes. Such is the case of Hajiya, who upon consoling Li on marriage, has this to say: "The first few years of marriage are often difficult [17:72]." Consider also that "even Li's mother footstep as she walks is mechanical [17:7]." This proves if evidence is needed that, due to ignorance, women themselves contributes to burden their lots. It follows that women's sufferings come from different directions including fellow women on whom patriarchy has infused its values. The case of Hajiya and Li's mother, illustrated above, are quite illustrative. As for Li's marriage with Habu which turns to be a failure, Alkali does seem to instruct the readers of *The Stillborn* that patriarchy is very strong and firmly rooted to the extent that a woman who goes her own way must, still, pay the consequences. As said earlier, our aim, in this section, is not to criticize Alkali as a

writer; rather, it is another effort at educating and soliciting the collaboration of the global community in the fight against discrimination of whatever forms. [15:97] states that these sexist established norms “view woman as a male appendage, a male adjunct with no identity of her own apart from her father, husband and male relations in the family, and as unachieving in society’s power structures, especially education and the economy.” To achieve such aim, women should have access to education, especially higher education. Alkali sees education as the most important means for a change of attitudes and that is certainly why, her heroines are free and fulfilled in direct proportion to the extent of their learning.

6. Conclusion

If literature is, as [2:75] points out, “one of the channels through which negative attitudes and stereotypes of women are perpetuated or even created”, the reality is that the reading of Zaynab Alkali’s *The Stillborn* provides an overview of some major difficulties faced by African women, in general, and Hausa women in northern Nigeria, in particular, in their relation with patriarchy. Alkali knows her society well and she is able to depict the structure of the society by directing her writing through the relationship between men and women. Alkali’s poignant illustration of the hardship of the women she depicts in the Hausa patriarchal society through *The Stillborn*, leads the reader to think that there is hardly anything more difficult, in this world, than being a woman. Alkali does not only point out that the greatest enemy for women is neither the male nor the conservative African traditions and customs but ignorance; but also and mainly she voices that the greatest struggle to free women in a society with history of oppression and exploitation passes certainly through the liberation of the minds of both men and women from discriminatory ideas copied from the Western and the African traditions and cultures.

7. Recommendations

Though our analysis is based on a fictional novel, it is good to recall that fictional narratives often generate from real life situations. [16:20], for instance, views that: “In every literary work the writer always attempts to mirror the society by making his work exposit or reflect the contemporary realities of his society.” For [11:108], “the function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demands that the writer, as a public voice, assumes a responsibility to reflect public concerns in his [or her] writings...” Following the above arguments, there is no doubt, the developments that take place within a society constitute the raw materials for the women writer’s works. As a result, it is by acknowledging fictional narratives as a reflection of real life situations that the study recommends to direct education towards the recognition of the potentials of women as human beings. For instance, the full involvement of girl children in domestic works denies them of useful time for study at home and consequently affects their academic performance. Also, as northern Nigeria is patriarchal and knowing that Islam plays an important role in the human interactions, religious leaders should use their efforts to correct misconceptions, especially with regard to the equality of all human beings before God so that mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence between men and women would be a reality. Governments, NGOs, and all other state and public institutions should fight against patriarchal prejudices throughout Nigeria and Africa as a whole if women are to make an effective contribution to the growth of Africa. The struggle must not be restricted to ‘women’s rights.’ It should rather be aimed at a transformation that guarantees freedom,

dignity for every woman, showing her the way to develop and use her ability for the benefit of a society without discrimination.

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